Care for children and older people remains undervalued and underfunded [1]

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EXCERPTS:

Care for children and older people has recently hit the headlines. Government announcements on funding reforms have put care firmly on the agenda for the next election.

But what do the announcements tell us about government priorities and the way childcare and eldercare are viewed and treated?

There are some striking parallels. Despite the austerity cuts, improving care has been prioritised as an issue that affects most families in Britain. But with spending tight, funding reforms have been delayed until after the next election - until autumn 2015 for childcare and 2016 for care for older people.

Before then, pressures will continue to grow on care services and shrinking local authority budgets. Demand for childcare is being fuelled by the new baby boom, while the original baby boomers will demand better care for our ageing population.

The delay in implementation has also been accompanied by a sense of anticlimax and missed opportunities for both childcare and eldercare, with some fundamental issues remaining. So whichever party forms the next government in 2015 will have a lot to sort out.

First, both sets of proposals add more layers of complexity to systems that are already confusing for families. The government should be looking to simplify funding streams, not complicate them.

In childcare for example, three funding streams - tax breaks, universal credit and free places - are all being separately developed with complex eligibility criteria rather than integrated. For eldercare, there will be two caps and a confusing means test, together with new rules about eligibility and qualifying care.

The committee scrutinising the care and support bill is already trying to grapple with this new complexity. And for both childcare and eldercare, one of the challenges is identifying the cost of delivering quality care so that funding reflects real costs for providers.

Secondly, both sets of proposals contain extra support for those on lower incomes and with fewer assets. But the main winners in both cases will be wealthier families. The bulk of funding for the childcare tax breaks will go to families with higher incomes, who can afford to spend at least £6,000 a year on childcare for each of their children. And the older people and their families who will gain most from the cap on care costs will be those with the greatest assets, who will see their inheritances relatively well-protected.

It could be argued that at least this binds wealthier families into a universal welfare system. But one of the consequences could be the development of two-tier childcare and eldercare systems. Care fees could also continue to rocket as demand outstrips supply.

Thirdly, with growing demand for care there should be more emphasis on prevention and early intervention. The cap on care costs focuses instead on crisis care, particularly for older people in care homes. This won't help integration with health services in local communities.

Similarly quality childcare can give children a good start in life and has a lifelong impact for children and parents. But the focus increasingly seems to be on helping parents work, rather than supporting families at a critical time in children's lives.

Finally, both proposals raise big questions about the future role of local authorities in supporting families who need care.

Despite this recent attention, care for both children and older people remains undervalued and underfunded. An analysis of reviews of care on the Good Care Guide site to be published shortly, shows that families rate childcare better than eldercare. This may reflect a range of cultural and historical funding issues, but it also shows how society values children compared to older people.

What is true is that childcare and eldercare are now key issues in the runup to the 2015 general election. We wait to see what alternatives the opposition proposes.

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